Rootless Nostalgia: Vienna in La Paz, La Paz in Elsewhere

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Starting in the mid-1930s, and up until the end of the first year of World War II, thousands of refugees from Nazi-dominated Central Europe, the majority of them Jews, fled to Bolivia to escape an increasingly vehement persecution. Indeed, in the panic months following the German Anschluss of Austria, Bolivia was one of very few remaining places in the entire world to accept Jewish refugees. But today, few Jews still reside in that country. From the very start of their large-scale inflow in the 1930s, many of the refugees had considered Bolivia only a temporary haven—“Hotel Bolivia,” as they described it. The majority emigrated in the years after the war: some back to Austria or Germany, others to the U.S., Israel, or to “less exotic” Latin American countries.

Examining the refugees’ recollections of Europe (specifically of Austria) in Bolivia, as well as their recollections of the “Bolivia experience” in the U.S. (some fifty years later), this essay engages in an act of witnessing (in retrospect) and reflects on the interrelations of place, memory, and nostalgia. In particular, it explores and begins to theorize “rootless nostalgia” specific to the postmemory of the second generation—to the children of exiles or refugees who have inherited ambivalent memories and a condition of homelessness from their parents. Such nostalgia, the author argues, is not “homesickness” or longing for return to a lost origin, or a yearning for a better time. Instead, it reflects a desire to establish a connection, or reconnection, between a past known only secondhand and a lived present. It represents a need to repair the ruptured fabric of a painfully discontinuous, fragmentary history, even as it acknowledges the impossibility of such reparation.

1. A gathering at Rosie’s place:

A few months before my mother died she invited us for dinner in her apartment in Queens, New York, together with Liel and Heini Lipczenko, her old friends from Vienna and La Paz. My two aunts, Regi and Frieda, as well as my uncle Julius, were also going to be there. In her desire to entice us to undertake the lengthy drive from Vermont to New York, Rose unabashedly used her insider’s, motherly, knowledge of my culinary appetites. “I’m cooking one of your favorite meals, Leo,” she announced, “picante de pollo with white corn and potatoes.” As for dessert, she revealed the pièce de résistance:

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1 This essay is a modified version of my keynote address at the Latin American Jewish Studies Association symposium in March 1999 at Princeton University. It contains some materials previously published in Hotel Bolivia: The Culture of Memory in a Refuge from Nazism (Hill & Wang, 1998).
“Apfelstrudel, which I’m baking myself.” It would be, she assured Marianne and me, “absolutely delicious.”

And the meal was indeed absolutely delicious. In her small apartment, which had no formal dining space, we all sat in the living room where my mother had opened her teak-veneer extender-table and marked the “specialness” of the occasion by setting it with her finest tablecloth and cloth napkins, which she had acquired in Bolivia, and her best dishes and dinnerware, bought at a nearby Bloomingdale’s department store. Our dinner conversation with the Lipczenkos and my relatives, spoken in a blend of English and German, with an occasional Spanish word or phrase mixed in, was animated and wide ranging. At some point in the evening it came around to Vienna, and then to Bolivia. Together, we all looked at one of my mother’s photo albums from what we called the “Bolivia years.” Those of us in the group who had been there reminisced and recounted anecdotes. Through our experiences, we felt connected among ourselves and to the place. My mother and her brother Julius, both with angina-weakened hearts, expressed frustration about their inability to visit La Paz and see the Andes again. A nostalgic tone infused the conversational air. Liesl Lipczenko, recalling that evening some months later, told me: “Even though I left La Paz so long ago, I feel a strong connection—everything seems familiar . . . I have such good memories of those years. I wish I was younger and could go there again. I have a real Sehnsucht [longing] for the place. Not for Vienna, not at all. But for Bolivia, I have Sehnsucht.”

Sitting at my mother’s table that evening, as I had done on so many other occasions, I don’t think I took special note of the décor in the living room—décor which, almost naturally by then, I had come to associate with that space. In hindsight, however, that décor certainly served as the perfect setting for our gathering and conversation. A framed, artist-signed lithograph of St. Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna—a picture my father had originally acquired and displayed in La Paz—hung as central exhibit on one of the room’s walls. Colored prints by the German-refugee artist Walter Sanden, depicting Bolivian landscapes and the lifeways of its Indian inhabitants, hung on another. On a shelf near a bookcase, my mother had placed an old plaster-of-paris statuette of ekeko—the Bolivian Aymara house god of good fortune and plenty. Standing on short legs, fat bellied, wearing sandals made from recycled auto tires, a knit Indian cap, and a manta, that ekeko was laden with miniaturized versions of wished-for goods and possessions: currency, sacks of grain and sweets, noodles, beans, baskets, utensils, tools, suitcases, and other foodstuffs and essentials. The belief is that ekeko must be “fed” annually by its owner—rewarded with a gift—so that he, in turn, will bring luck and prosperity. My mother, regularly, put a fresh cigarette in ekeko’s mouth.

Something else happened that evening—so commonplace in the discourse of refugees, exiles, and emigrants that it hardly called attention to itself. Almost zestfully, but hardly conscious of our doing so, we performed what might be termed “the refrain of the displaced.” “Our roots are ‘diasporic,’” observes the French-Polish writer Henri
Raczymow. “They do not go underground. They are not attached to any particular land or soil . . . Rather they creep up along the many roads of dispersion . . . Such roads are endless.”

On that evening in Rose’s place in Queens we re-enacted the paradox of diasporic rootlessness: “No matter where you are, you are also in another place.” Sitting in Queens, Over Here, we were also, strangely and somehow familiarly, Over There, in Vienna and in La Paz.

2. Vienna in La Paz: Nostalgic Memory/Critical Memory

Before the rise of Nazism in Central Europe, very few Jews, perhaps less than a hundred, had settled in Bolivia. European travelers visiting Bolivia in the early decades of the twentieth century considered it among the least “Europeanized” of the South American nations. But starting in the mid-1930s, and up until the end of the first year of the World War II, thousands of refugees from Nazi-dominated Central Europe, the majority of them Jews, fled to Bolivia to escape an increasingly vehement persecution. Indeed, in the panic months following the German Anschluss of Austria in March 1938 and Kristallnacht in November of that year, Bolivia was one of very few remaining places in the entire world to accept Jewish refugees. In the short period between then and the end of the first year of the war, some twenty thousand refugees, primarily from Austria and Germany, entered Bolivia—more than in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and India combined. When the war ended, a second, smaller wave of immigrants, mostly Eastern European Holocaust survivors and displaced relatives of previous refugees, arrived there. The new immigrants (pre- and post-war) settled primarily in La Paz, a city more than 12,500 feet above sea level, as well as in Cochabamba, Oruro, Sucre, and in small mining and tropical agricultural communities throughout the land.

In Bolivia, the refugees began to reconstruct a version of the world that they had been forced to abandon. Their own origins and social situations had been diverse in Central Europe, ranging across generational, class, educational, and political differences, and incorporating various professional, craft, and artistic backgrounds. Their numbers included persons who had at one time been engineers, doctors, lawyers, musicians, actors, and artists, as well as a numerous skilled and unskilled workers whose living had been interrupted by Nazi exclusionary decrees. Although most who came to Bolivia were Jews, or were married to Jews, a significant minority were non-Jewish political refugees: Communists, Socialists and others persecuted by the Nazi regime. Jews themselves differed greatly in the degree of their identification with their religion and its traditions. There were Zionists among them, atheists, orthodox believers, “High Holiday” Jews, and non-practitioners. They shared a common identity

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as Jews only in the sense, perhaps, that they had all been defined as “Jews” from the outside—that the Nazis had “othered” them as Jews.

No matter what their background differences had been in Europe, however, the vast majority of refugees arrived in South America in dire straits, with few personal possessions and very little money. This in itself had a leveling effect, cutting across their previous class distinctions. But other factors also helped to create a sense of collective identity among them, aiding in their adjustment and survival. Their common history of persecution was certainly one of these. Each and every one of the refugees had been identified as undesirable, stripped of citizenship and possessions. Despite differences in the details of their particular experiences, they were all “in the same boat.” The war back in Europe, and the fact that so many of them had relatives and friends from whom they had been separated, was also an ever-present reality of which they were collectively conscious and which bonded them together. They kept themselves—each other—informed of news about the war from accounts in the press and radio, and they shared efforts to discover the fate of those left behind. In this regard, the German language (which they spoke at home and among themselves) served as a vehicle of inquiry, information, and unity. It allowed them to communicate intimately and to express themselves with a degree of familiarity that most could never attain in the Spanish of their surroundings.

Ultimately, however, it was Austro/German Jewish bourgeois society, the cultural end-product of nineteenth century Jewish emancipation in Central Europe, that provided the new arrivals with a model for emulation and a common locus for identification in their place of refuge. Indeed, at the very time when that dynamic social and cultural amalgam was being ruthlessly and systematically destroyed by the Nazis, the Jewish refugees in Bolivia attempted to recall and revive a version of it in a land thousands of miles from their home: in a country that offered them a haven, but in which many of them felt themselves as mere sojourners.

They did not, of course, physically reconstruct a “Little Vienna” or “Little Hamburg” in the Andes, as one of the refugees jokingly referred to the German and Austrian communities that were established in La Paz, Cochabamba, Oruro, and Sucre. But a glance through the pages of the refugee-founded German-language newspaper *Rundschau vom Illimani* in 1939–40, or of the *Jüdische Wochenschau*—the Buenos Aires German-Jewish paper that covered Bolivian immigrant news on a monthly basis during this same period—both illustrates the range of the immigrants’ economic and institutional adjustment in Bolivia and confirms the character of their symbolic reconnection with Central Europe. Advertisements for the Café Viena, Club Metropol, Pension Europa, and for other eateries like them, each promise foods at moderate prices: coffees, Bolivian-produced “European” sausages, “Viennese” pastries, delicatessen items, and lunch and dinner menus identified with culinary pleasures from “back home.” “Saüfst, stirbst/saüfst net, stirbst a. Also saüf!! aber, ‘Imperial!’” “If you booze,
you die/ if you don’t booze, you also die. So booze!! But [at the] ‘Imperial!’’ reads an ad in Viennese dialect for the newly established Café-Restaurant Imperial—which also pledges a pleasant dining experience and daily musical entertainment. Made-to-order clothing, cut in the “latest European styles,” is featured in the advertisements of the Haberdashery Berlin, the Casa Paris-Viena, and the Peleteria Viena, but second-hand European men’s and women’s apparel, brought from overseas and sold by the refugees through the Lipczenko brothers’ Casa Wera, is offered as an affordable alternative as well. The Buchhandlung (Bookstore) La America listing German editions of authors such as Franz Werfel, Bruno Weil, Stefan Zweig, is regularly publicized in the weekly papers, as is the German-language rental-library Osmaru, which lends out a wide range of previously-owned fiction and non-fiction books at very low fees. The Kleinkunstbühne (Cabaret theater)—presenting scenes from Schnitzler, von Hoffmansthal, and Beer-Hoffmann, as well as readings of German classics and Viennese dialect skits—advertises its cultural offerings often, as does the refugee-organized Colegium Musicum, with its chamber music concerts and recitals featuring Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert played by musicians trained at Conservatories in Vienna, Prague, and Berlin. In each issue, starting in late August 1939, the Rundschau also carries a weekly schedule for the daily hour-long German-language program on Radio Nacional, a Bolivian radio station. The broadcasts, produced and staffed by refugee actors and performers, consist of brief news summaries, lectures and recitals, dramatizations of German plays, radio-mystery stories, and live and recorded performances of European classical and Viennese dance music.

For displaced Austrians like my parents or the Lipczenkos, the site of much collective activity in La Paz was “the Club”—the “Hogar Austriaco” (“Austrian Home”) as it was generally known in Spanish. With special fondness, I remember family meals taken in the club’s dining room, a large “multi-purpose” room, convertible into a theater or cabaret hall, with a small stage curtained in the red-and-white colors of the Austrian flag located at one of its ends. Not long ago, in memorabilia I inherited from my parents, I discovered an “Hogar Austriaco” cabaret-program from the early years of the 1940s. It introduces a show, “Radio Wien Sendet: Ein Wunschcabaret!” (“Radio Vienna Broadcasts: A Cabaret on Demand”) and lists, among its entertainment numbers, “In einem Wiener Vorstadtvarieté” (“In a Viennese Suburban Music Hall”), “Ein Maederl aus Moedling,” (“A Lass from Moedling”), “Frauen sind zum Küssen da” (“Women are Made to be Kissed”), and various other skits in Viennese dialect.

Of course, in employing nostalgic memory so creatively to reinforce the refugees’ sense of cultural and historical continuity, the Austrian Club was certainly not at all unique. Other organizations played similar roles. The desire to establish and nurture a German-Jewish communal identity in Bolivia, for example, emerged early among refugees, and familiar Jewish institutional structures that had served as centers of Jewish communal life in Europe served them as models to bring this about. It was no doubt from...
their recollections of the various *Israelitische Kultusgemeinden* in the larger cities of Central Europe, that one of the first centers of collective immigrant activity, the *Comunidad Israelita*, was founded in La Paz in 1939 by a group of Jewish refugees from Germany and Austria. This communal organization established a Jewish temple in which religious services were held, an old people’s home, and two institutions that I attended: a *Kinderheim* serving as kindergarten, boarding, and day-care center, and a school, *La Escuela Boliviana-Israelita*. From its inception, however, the *Comunidad* also fulfilled a less utilitarian social function. Its quarters in the city, and its Sunday “garden retreat” in rural Obrajes, became meeting places where Jewish refugees could gather, eat meals, read newspapers, play cards, chess, or ping-pong—where they could gossip, socialize, exchange information, and reminisce about their lives, loves, and the past.

In thinking back to the refugee environment I was raised in, however, it is important not to privilege nostalgia and nostalgic memory too much. The culture and community created by the refugee immigrants should certainly not be misrepresented as merely a curious, somewhat ironic reconstruction in the Andes of a *sanitized* Central European culture and past—one from which Hitler, and the persecutions and policies that had led to refugeehood, were obliterated. The immigrants were, after all, *refugees* and not voluntary émigrés. Before their departure from Europe, each and every one of them had been identified as undesirable and stripped of citizenship and possessions. Their “present” in Bolivia—the “here-and-now” from which they looked back upon the past and confronted the future—had come about as a consequence of oppression and expulsion, and it was indelibly marked by painful loss, separation, and ongoing war. Within that present, nostalgic memory certainly did help the refugees to transcend the negativity of their recent history by reconnecting them to broadly shared values and social practices that had characterized the Austro-German bourgeois culture to which they had belonged, or aspired to belong. When the future seemed darkest to them, as the news of Nazi military victories and Nazi atrocities against Jews enveloped them, and their own life chances seemed most precarious, they turned to the past as a way to gain some sustenance and stability in their present. In this respect the communal reconstruction engendered by nostalgic memory reflected *cultural resistance* and *cultural survival* on the part of the refugees—a denial of success to Nazi efforts to disconnect and expel them from the Austro/German *kulturkreis* in which they had played such an integral part.

But nostalgic memory, the selective emphasis on what was *positive* in the past, was only one layer of refugee recall. Critical memory, memory incorporating what was *negative* and *bitter* from the immediate past, was always present as well. As nostalgia’s complicating “other side,” it too, became a prominent creative force and influence within Bolivian refugee society. Indeed, at one level, critical memory of persecution “experienced” and “remembered” was the over-arching framework of refugee collective identity in Bolivia. Within a present clouded by displacement, insecurity, and war, this was the connective tissue of their “refugeehood”—the ubiquitous bond that obliterated many
differences among them. It also added a distinctively political dimension to their institutions and to their culture and community. If nothing else, this political dimension affirmed that, even though they had all been victimized, they had been neither crushed nor extinguished.

Again, the Austrian Club provides a clear illustration. While nostalgic memory had animated and shaped its function as a social and cultural institution that reproduced elements of a “lost homeland” in the Bolivian refuge, critical memory engendered and influenced the club’s role as an activist political organization. The formal name of the club, after all, was “Federación de Austríacos Libres en Bolivia” (“Federation of Free Austrians in Bolivia”). In its charter document, and in the course of a number of “general assemblies” called during the war years, its members considered two fundamental tenets to be at the very heart of the club’s existence and function: its re-affirmation of an Austrian national identity distinct from that of Germany, and its political work to re-establish a “free,” “independent,” “democratic,” Austria which would negate Austria’s Anschluss to the German Reich and battle Nazi domination.

We, the children of the refugees, through our immersion into the language and cultural universe of our parents and their fellow immigrants, also came to feel a certain nostalgia for places and lifeways that most of us had never known in their actual setting—places we encountered only as already nostalgic reconstructions in a situation of displacement. I now recognize that the nostalgic memory engendered in me and others of the “second generation” was indeed what might be identified as rootless nostalgia—nostalgia about nostalgia, so to speak. Unlike our parents’, our nostalgia was not a classical Heimweh, “homesickness”—a pained longing for an estranged native land or lost origin. It was also certainly not a yearning for irretrievable youth—for some better time in a bygone past, or for a world of yesterday. But it did reflect a desire to establish a connection between a past known only secondhand and a lived present. It represented, I think, our need to repair the ruptured fabric of a painfully discontinuous, fragmentary history, even while acknowledging the impossibility of such reparation.

And yet, the “Over There” European world that was explicitly or implicitly conveyed to us children also came laced with strong feelings of ambivalence and negativity. The critical, negative, memories carried by our parents and their fellow refugees—their anger, bitterness, insecurity, fright, and sense of estrangement, were also transmitted to us. It couldn’t have been otherwise. How would it have been possible for recent refugees from Nazi terror to insulate the traumatic aspects of their past experiences in Europe, and their intense fears about the future, from their children? The people around me, with whom I had the most intimate contact, spoke with one another and in my presence about cruelty and persecution, about the war and relatives left behind, about loss and destruction, about Nazis and Hitler. I was a young boy during the war years: certainly I didn’t understand much of what they said at the time. But something about the darkness of their tone and the strain in their voices did not escape me. The truly frightening, violent, and sadistic aspects of a world reflected in whispered adult
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conversation became, for a child of refugees in the early 1940s, a shadow within my imagination. Europe, the culture of Europe, was a lost origin steeped in nostalgia. It was also a fount for my nightmares.

And we, the children of the refugees, were also the ones who had the most intimate, everyday, contact with Bolivians and the culture of the land in which we lived. Although we conversed in German with our parents and other refugees, Spanish was a native language for us; we were taught in Spanish in our schools; we learned about Bolivian history and about Murillo, Bolivar, Sucre—heroes of the independence struggles against Spain; we read La Razón and Última Hora, Bolivian newspapers, and listened to Radio Fides; we had Bolivian friends with whom we played; with pleasure we anticipated and joined in the festivities during carnival, the alacitas fair, and Bolivian patriotic holidays; we loved salteñas and empanadas, and the many delicious foods made with Andean potatoes, corn, and spicy-hot aji or locoto; we cheered and became followers of local and national soccer teams; we were awed by the natural splendor of our surroundings, by the smells of eucalyptus, the beauty of mount Illimani and Lake Titicaca. But, despite the fact that many of us were Bolivian citizens by birth with potentially greater access than our parents to the social spheres and folkways of the Bolivian Spanish-speaking middle classes and ruling elites, we remained in a kind of state of suspension, culturally somewhere in between. Even as a young child, the uprootedness of my parents and their fellow refugees reinforced a feeling in me that I did not truly belong in the place where I was born: that my origins lay elsewhere, and that I was not really at home.

But where was home?

3. Departures

Today, altogether no more than twelve to fifteen hundred Jews still live in Bolivia, the vast majority of them post-war Eastern European immigrants. From the very start of their large-scale inflow into the country in the 1930s, many, perhaps most, of the German, Austrian, and other refugees from Central Europe had considered Bolivia only a temporary haven—“Hotel Bolivia,” as they described it. Some of them, who had managed to flee Europe in large part only because they had been able to acquire Bolivian visas, left soon after their arrival, often crossing borders illegally, re-emigrating to Chile, Argentina, Brazil—places with larger and more established European populations, “officially closed” to new immigration at the time but accessible through the “back door.” Others stayed a few years longer, generally until after the end of the war, and then left. Many, who managed to get the mandatory affidavit of support and the required quota clearance and visa in the mid-1940s, went directly to the United States. Hundreds moved elsewhere in South America, especially to Argentina, eventually choosing to become permanent residents there, or to wait before emigrating once
again, either to North America or to Europe. A smaller number, usually persons who had considered themselves primarily as "political refugees" in Bolivia—Social Democrats, Communists, and other activist political opponents of the Nazi regime—went back to Germany and Austria. Scores of refugees left for Israel after its establishment as a state in 1948.

If I could now ask my parents to give their reasons for leaving Bolivia in 1950, I would assume that they would include many of the same factors recalled by other Central European departees: the seemingly greater possibilities for improving their "life chances" elsewhere, the unpredictability of Bolivian politics, the difficulties in bridging cultural differences, and their inability "to feel" as though they genuinely belonged and were truly a part of the Bolivian social and political reality. They, like other refugees, felt immensely grateful and indebted to Bolivia for having opened its doors and granting them asylum when no one else would do so. Yet, in my parents' case—as in that of so many other refugees who left Bolivia after the war—the desire to rejoin surviving members of a family from whom they had been separated, to reconstruct some version of familial life in the aftermath of dispersal and destruction, was no doubt the most important motivation for re-emigration.

I don't remember ever being asked to voice an opinion in the decision to leave Bolivia, and I am uncertain how it was ever determined that the United States (instead of Bolivia, or some other Latin American or European country) would be the place for our re-gathering. I do recall that when my parents decided to send me off as companion to my grandmother Lina after she received her U.S. visa early in 1950, it seemed totally natural to me—a matter of course, what had to happen next—as though I had always been prepared for that tomorrow to arrive. In my memory of the years between the end of the war and our actual departure from La Paz, my parents, grandmother, sister, and I always lived like sojourners: temporary visitors in Bolivia, not permanent residents.

Thus when I left Bolivia as a ten-year-old with my grandmother—left the country where I was born but in which I had been encouraged not to deepen my roots—I left willingly, not thinking about the meaning or consequences of the break I was making. It seems to me I believed then that I might never return to Bolivia, to friends I was leaving behind, the spectacular beauty of the place, its cultural life, music, foods, its air, colors, and smells. I appear not to have allowed myself to feel and to express the profundity of the rupture. I don't recall shedding tears when the train pulled out of the station on its way to our port of embarkation in Chile. I was going to live in the United States of America. That would be my future. My parents and sister would join me there in a few months. We would all be together—what remained of the family would be reunited. Already I seemed to think of Bolivia as a concluded chapter. Time to turn the page.

For years after I arrived in the United States I placed my Bolivia experience in some rear compartment of my mind. I did reach back to access and use it on those occasions when I wanted (or needed) to present myself as someone who was really
somewhat different, with a more unusual background, slightly more exotic perhaps than the children/age-mates, colleagues, with whom I interacted or in whose midst I lived. Yes, I was born in La Paz, the highest capital-city in the world, yes I did grow up bilingual in Spanish and German, yes my parents were refugees from Hitler who had managed to flee Austria late—almost too late. But my primary attitude in the decade after coming to this country was to consider my connection to Bolivia as a concluded aspect of my past—a ten-year prologue which was somehow disconnected, separate, from the rest of my life. Here, in the U.S., I acquired a new language, English, which gradually pushed my Spanish and German to a secondary level, and through it, I experienced the cultural remolding and reshaping that schooling, contact with peers, and exposure to the majority way of life effects. Largely unconscious of what was happening to me, I was gradually “North Americanized” by an assimilationist process. I was socialized, politicized, and educated to become part of the dominant culture in whose midst I now lived, and I was rewarded by its institutions. And yet, having already been profoundly inscribed in childhood with the history and culture of a people who had been defined as “other” and who had been persecuted and marginalized, I also never felt totally absorbed by this process.

4. La Paz in Elsewhere: The “Bolivia Experience” and the Limits of Transmission

It is 1992 and I have returned to La Paz for a visit—the first time that my wife Marianne and two of our children, Alex and Gabriel, are with me. I am eager to introduce them to Bolivia, and to show them La Paz, the city they have heard so much about but never seen.

“Down those incredibly steep steps,” I tell them as we walk about my old neighborhood and I point to the stone-stair passageway between the Prado and the Calle Mexico where our apartment had been, “an American soldier, probably drunk, drove a jeep on a dare, all the way from top to bottom.”

“There is where I went to school for first grade.” I point to the second floor of a building on the Prado that now houses ‘California Doughnuts’ and ‘California Burgers.’ ‘The Synagogue was also located up there. I remember when we received our first report cards. I was so proud that I could write in script that I signed my father’s name on my report, and the appropriate parent’s name on the report of a handful of impressed classmates!’

“A stray bullet penetrated the window of that house during the street battles here in La Paz in July 1946 and accidentally killed a boy, my age—someone I used to play with, a child of refugees. At one point during that ‘revolution,’ when one side was trying to bomb various public buildings, my parents hid my sister Elly and me in a makeshift shelter, under Elly’s crib.”

“Here, I believe, is where the Austrian Club used to be,” I indicate with some hesitation, pointing to the shut gate of a walled-yard that now contains parked trucks.
and vans. “It seems to have disappeared when most of the Austrian refugees departed. I spent many Sunday afternoons here.”

“What do you think about these delicious salteñas?,” I eagerly ask Marianne and the children, who seem less than enthusiastic about tasting the spicy, piping hot, Bolivian mid-morning snack that I have long adored—and somewhat suspicious about the true identity of the meaty ingredients inside its doughy shell. “What kind did you get, chicken or beef?” My query is addressed to the three of them. “Alpaca, I think.” Alex responds, without even a hint of a smile.

I am eager to take them all around the city: to show them the (now renovated) Plaza Abaroa, where I learned to ride a bicycle, and the location in Obajes of the no-longer existent refugee-owned Quinta Elma, where my parents occasionally took me for afternoon strudel and a Papaya Salvieti. I take them to the Cine Tesla where I saw Pinocchio, my first film. I point out the white marble Colón (Columbus) statue on the Prado and explain to them how different and uncrowded the Prado and this spot by the statue used to be when Elly and I and the Lipczenko boys chased each other around it. To place after place I lug them, seemingly oblivious to the fact that they have only recently arrived and are not yet used to the effects of the city’s high altitude. Quite relentlessly, I want to share “my La Paz,” as I remember it to have been, with them.

Years later, as I review highlights of my guided tour on a videotape we made on that day, I notice an eager, almost anxious, tone in my voice. There is pleasure in my face from having Marianne and the boys with me. I smile often, laugh with enjoyment. Yet there is also an intensity in my efforts to lead them into my past through the sites of my memory, a kind of frustration about my sense of blockage by an invisible and insurmountable barrier to transmission. How could I convey a past to them which even for me, at that moment, was far removed in time—a past whose traces were only identifiable like layers within an archeology of change, a shadowy past that, except in deepest personal memory perhaps, was gone, forever unrecoverable? And in thinking about my efforts to connect to my own “Bolivia experience,” and to pass aspects of it on to my children, I realize that my affect on that day is not so very different from that of the many persons who recalled and recorded their “Bolivia experience” for me in the course of my research for Hotel Bolivia. I was perhaps a more knowing listener to their accounts than Marianne, Gabriel or Alex, could be to mine—a participant who had been there, albeit as a child, when they were there as well. My parents and many in my family were their fellow refugees. I could relate better to details in their narratives. I knew many of the places about which they spoke, even some of the persons whom they mentioned. I could follow up with questions, and ask for further elaboration. And yet, in some fashion, for them as for me, the gap between the past and the present memory of it, compounded by a sense of intransmissibility—of incompleteness, of difficulties with language, of not really being heard, of not truly being understood—emerges in every account. A feeling of loss is certainly a component of this sense of intrans-
mittibility—a kind of mourning that is perhaps only qualitatively less intense, less wrenching, than the yearning for a lost homeland that so many of the refugees expressed on their voyage of displacement. In the not-too-distant future, I realized most profoundly at the time, the generation of refugees who fled to Bolivia will no longer be alive. And those of the next generation, children of refugees like me, are middle-aged, preoccupied with their own transition into seniority and the accelerated passing of time. If the traces fade and lose their meaning, and transmission is so difficult and incomplete, how will memory survive?

I realize, of course, that the fullness, the richness, the depth, the multidimensionality of the “Bolivia experience,” like any experience, will forever remain beyond recall and complete narrative reconstruction. Indeed, in time this episode may fade even more into the background of history: a small story, composed of thousands of smaller ones, that may shrink to a paragraph, a sentence, even to a footnote within the larger story of Nazi persecution, the Holocaust, and the rescue of the displaced in the era of World War II. The willingness of so many people to record their memories of emigration and time in Bolivia, and my own eagerness to remember and convey my recollections to my children, is most certainly connected to an understanding of this evanescence, and to a desire to combat it. And despite the incompleteness of transmission, despite its failure to capture and convey experience through memory, transmission is surrounded by values and lessons that transcend its inherent limitations—values and lessons that can indeed be passed on from person to person, from generation to generation over time. My children, and theirs, will never truly be able to “see” what I have seen; from the vantage of my present, I can no longer truly “see” that past myself. But, perhaps some elements of this experience—of its scope and meaning—will touch them and remain within them, and be recalled. At the very least, they would have heard from me, as I heard from my parents and those around me, about the realities and consequences of exclusion and persecution, and the need to battle against them; about survival and the capacity for renewal as expressed in so many refugee lives; about decency and compassion, such as Bolivians of all backgrounds manifested towards immigrants whose culture differed so greatly from their own. Ultimately, they might also come to understand and learn from my very eagerness “to tell,” as I have learned from the many “tellers” for whom I acted as “medium,” that transmission is itself a meaningful act—a value worth nurturing and passing on.

Yet a question continues to linger. In the very performance of our telling, in our efforts to bridge a break in time and the rupture between eras, are we also conveying across generations what our parents conveyed to us—a sense of diasporic rootlessness and a knowledge of the fundamental fragility of place? Is the price of our transmission the bequeathing to our children and grandchildren of our radical skepticism toward the condition called home?